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# Defense Report

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## Making Service Families Pay to See Military Doctors—An Idea Whose Time Should Never Come

At the instigation of the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and over strong Defense Department objections, the President's budget for fiscal year 1988 contains a proposal to charge service family members and retirees a fee for using military medical facilities. What OMB proposes is nothing more than a nuisance fee which the numbers jugglers claim will reduce costs and improve the quality of care in military medical facilities. It will do neither.

Several years ago the Senate Appropriations Committee toyed with the idea of such a fee, but firmly rejected it after it was clearly demonstrated that no savings would result. Next came the Congressional Budget Office with its suggestion for saving budget dollars by digging into the pockets of the men and women in uniform and those who have previously served. Each time that this ill-conceived notion has been brought up, it has been repudiated in the strongest terms by legislators who considered the realities.

What makes charging a user fee for going to a military doctor such a bad idea is the fact that its impact would be most severe upon those in the service who can least afford to pay it—married junior enlisted persons. Critics of the nuisance fee, both in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill, point out that it may cause lower ranking people to postpone seeking timely outpatient care which could result in higher in-patient costs. At the very least, it directly opposes another ongoing DoD program to encourage greater use of more cost-effective military medical facilities rather than the expensive cost-sharing program whereby individual treatment is procured at civilian facilities.

To military families, this proposed user fee is viewed as another broken promise—an erosion of their benefits which contradicts the understanding given when they enlisted, that medical care would be furnished in military facilities without charge. It is hoped that there are still enough Senators and Representatives aboard who agree that charging service families for using service medical facilities is ill-advised and will tell the budgeteers to forget it.